***“Summertime, and the Livin’ Is….Inviting” (but who’s invited?)***

***Jeremiah 2:4-13; Luke 14:1, 7-14 Trumbull Congregational Church, Trumbull, CT***

***August 28, 2022 Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, guest preacher***

Today is the third of four messages on the theme *“Summertime, and the Livin’ Is….”* Copies of this message, along with the first two in the series preached August 14 and 21, are available in the rear of the church, and I thank Lisa Gruttadauria for making these available.

Two weeks ago we heard, using that famous lullaby from the opera *“Porgy and Bess,”* that it’s *“Summertime, and the Livin’ Is Easy”* with the added question “but for whom?” We heard Jesus’ challenge that he brings division as well as peace, and we wrestled with the notion that the relaxed rhythms of summer are not available to all.

Last week we heard that it’s *“Summertime, and the Livin’ Is Healing”* with the added question “but how long does it take?” Jesus’ healing of the woman infirmed for 18 years, and the legalistic and condemning response of the leader of the synagogue, challenged us to wrestle with the healing of ourselves and our world, specifically in the context of racial reconciliation.

Today’s message is *“Summertime, and the Livin’ Is…Inviting” (but who’s invited?)* Jesus uses the context of a wedding to remind us that those of us who are privileged ought not to overestimate that privilege; and that the usual human categories for who’s “in” and who’s “out” are completely deconstructed by Jesus’ exhortation to *“invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.”*

Ah, weddings! If you’ve planned one or are in the process of planning one, you know that some of the most taxing decisions are who gets invited and where they are seated. One of the most challenging decisions for Carol and me when we married was who to invite, for you never invite just individuals or couples, but constellations of people. And trust me: Carol’s extensive family has a LOT of constellations.

Then there’s the challenge of who sits next to whom. My son Adam and his newly-minted bride, Katie, did a great job managing expectations at their wedding May 14th. This was no easy task with two families to manage just on my son’s side – mine and his mother’s –but they did a great job.

Of course, they were helped by today’s custom of assigning seats, which apparently was not the case in Jesus’ day, when there was clamoring for the choicest seats. My study Bible titles today’s Gospel passage “humility and hospitality” in which Jesus’ instruction is painfully clear:

*“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you ‘Give this person your place;’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.”* **(Luke 14:8-9)**

So while the risk that you or I will sit in the wrong place at a wedding is low, just TRY to save a seat on the front row of your son or daughter’s, or grandson or granddaughter or nephew or niece’s elementary school concert. Many schools warn parents against this practice prior to the event, enforcement guaranteed by school officials and other parents!

Now all this is good counsel and fairly easy to follow. We are all creatures of self-interest and nobody wants to be publicly embarrassed. Some years ago we attended a family baptism on Carol’s former husband’s side; and more recently a funeral on her mother’s side. In both cases we stayed in the background, only to have the delightful experience of being called forward as part of the family and to sit *“at the place of honor.”*

But Jesus, as is so often the case, goes *“from preachin’ to meddlin’.”* To the host of the Sabbath meal to which Jesus was a guest, he then said:

*“’When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends…in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But…invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”* **(Luke 14:12b-14)**

It could be worse, I suppose. I’m glad Jesus said “a luncheon or a dinner” and not “a wedding.” The average cost of a 2022 wedding is somewhere between $27,000 and $28,000. In Jesus’ time, weddings were multiple day affairs, still the case in other parts of the world and increasingly so in the U.S. as we accommodate our far-flung families and sometimes-extravagant tastes. I mean, you have a four-course meal, dance, eat cake and then, if you stay long enough, have a snack bar with burgers and French fries?

So, it’s summertime and the living is inviting, but who is invited? My former District Superintendent used to say that one of the most dangerous things a church could say is *“All are welcome.”* Another colleague used to use that same sentence with the follow-on *“All means all.”* But “all” is, truly, a counter-cultural value. Even in the Church – some might say, *“Too often, very much in the Church”* – we are vulnerable to a subtle or unconscious vetting of who’s in and who’s out. Sometimes it is quite conscious. Either way, it is often based on the easily identifiable things, like appearance and language. Other, less visible things, like where we live and where we’re from and what we do, come later. Someone once asked me after leading worship. *“What political party do you belong to?”* I answered, *“What are you going to do with that information if I give it to you?”* The person laughed and went on their way, but the temptation is to vet one another to see if the other “measures up.”

Carl Sandburg, late poet laurite of the United States and Pulitzer Prize winner for his biography of Abraham Lincoln, was once interviewed by Edward R. Murrow. Murrow asked *“What is the ugliest word in the English language.”* Sandburg thought for a long time and finally answered, *“The ugliest word in the English language is ‘exclusive.’”*

This congregation’s website statement against racism is powerful and your welcome of people regardless of sexual orientation is noteworthy. Nearly a generation ago I consulted with a church considering taking that latter step. At one point I remarked, *“Homophobia is the last socially acceptable prejudice.”* A member of that church’s leadership team quickly replied, *“No, prejudice against people with handicapping conditions, mental and physical, is still socially acceptable.”* I learned something very important that day: no matter how committed we are to inclusivity, we need reminding exactly how wide Jesus casts the net: this wide (point to cross).

Jesus’ command to throw a feast for those who can’t pay you back is a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. Last Sunday we heard a call for volunteers to Thursday’s serving at Nourish Bridgeport. I hope that call was successful. What other ways might this congregation find to welcome people who are not yet here, but might be, if an invitation was extended?

As I mentioned in the announcements, we are having an ice cream social next Sunday. For the last two weeks I noticed how vigorously you extend greetings to one another during the Peace, waving and smiling and seeing who is with you in worship. It seemed to me that we ought to have something after worship that would allow those who could remain for a brief time of fellowship to do so. And I like ice cream and it’s summer, so there you go.

I don’t know how Pastor Tim and the church officers will feel but I trust it will be taken well. As a guest it is a bit forward, deciding to host this and asking for your assistance. Sometimes it’s better to ask for forgiveness rather than permission. Since I’ve gone this far, let’s go all the way: invite someone to join you next Sunday. Don’t be misled: I am not naïve. People don’t attend church for ice cream, especially before lunch; although some of us do live by the credo *“Life is uncertain: eat dessert first.”*

But whatever this congregation means to you….whatever faith means to you….whatever being a follower of Jesus Christ means to you….this is about as easy as it gets to share it. Next Sunday we’ll have Holy Communion (to which all are welcome), a special message for the kids that I’ve promised they’ll be glad they’re here for (the more the merrier), and a chance to indulge our palettes while enjoying the company of those with whom we worship, week in and week out.

All I ask is that you invite someone to join you.

Please hear me. I am not asking that you get them here, unless they want to come and just need a ride. I am not asking that you convince them how great a church this is. I am not asking that you explain the Apostles’ Creed or the Westminster Catechism. I am not asking you to narrate how the early church blew up from a small sect in Judaism to a worldwide faith because we stopped asking people to observe the Jewish kosher laws as a precondition to following Christ. I am simply asking that you invite some one. Blame me if you want. But extend an invitation in love. If they accept, great! If they don’t, are we a worse off congregation than if you had not?

The purist might say that ice cream is not a lunch or dinner, and that people in need have greater nutritional needs than lactose and sugar. Point well taken. But let’s start somewhere. Jesus invites us to labor and pray for the time that human distinctions do not distract us from seeing our neighbor as God sees them: people who have sinned but are redeemed and forgiven people of inestimable worth. For that is how God see us, too: people who have sinned but are redeemed and forgiven people of inestimable worth. Summertime, and the livin’ is inviting. For all of us. For all are welcome. All means all. No exceptions. Amen.